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# **Intergroup Relations in Applied Research: Respondent Participation as a Clinical Intervention**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Little attention has been paid to the clinical aspects of relationships between groups involved in applied research. This article reports on how naturally appearing community groups with a vested interest in the outcome of a research study were involved in the research, thus strengthening their own sense of involvement. At the same time, the willingness of the researchers to involve community groups in an open process strengthened the research.

Clinical sociology, by any other name, is an established concern of applied social research. Applied research is clinical to the extent that it deals with behavioral problems related to the collection of valid information and to the extent that it is part of a change-oriented process (Alderfer and Brown, 1975; Argyris, 1970; Leitko and Peterson, 1982).

The clinical focus within applied research has been mostly at the individual level. Concern has focused on psychological defenses to information giving (Argyris, 1970), cognitive abilities relevant to information recall (Webb et al, 1966), researcher-respondent relationships (Bailey, 1982:189-91), and the impact of research on respondents (Bonacich, 1970; Kelman, 1967).

Less attention has been paid to clinical aspects of group and intergroup relations within applied research settings. While the role of groups in information gathering and change processes has not been totally overlooked, only limited

functions have been studied. In particular, the use of "contrived" groups to collect information (Argyris, 1970; Burke, 1982), to sensitize respondents to research problems, to overcome individual resistance to participation (Argyris, 1970), to feed back information, and to institute change based on research findings (Nadler, 1977) have been examined.

There is a lacuna, however, regarding the role of naturally existing groups in the research process. This is especially true for respondents, who, against sociological common sense, are likely to be viewed as a disconnected mass rather than as a constellation of networks. With few exceptions (Alderfer and Brown, 1975; Priester and Kent, 1984), the processes through which naturally existing groups influence information giving and change processes have not been explored. Neither has the effect of researcher-respondent relations, as intergroup relations, on respondent group norms and beliefs. These processes will be examined through case study materials in this paper.

### **Proximity Groups in Applied Research**

In particular I will focus on the role of "proximity groups" in applied research. Proximity groups are social networks—neighborhoods, co-workers, classmates and so forth—whose relationships are defined at least partly by physical proximity.

Proximity groups mediate the relationships between individuals and large-scale institutions like corporations and governments. While they are mostly loosely connected to these institutions, they claim at least "limited liability" for individual behavior and often exert quite strong pressures for loyalty and conformity (Suttles, 1972). Moreover, they are quite often key to opinion formation and truth testing for information on issues (Katz, 1965).

Proximity groups are important to applied research in two ways. First, where research often requires cooperation from respondents, proximity groups exert normative pressures regarding cooperation with outsiders and the "release" of information considered important to the group (Alderfer and Brown, 1975; Leitko and Peterson, 1982). Second, proximity groups are important to the formation of consensus and action plans based on research findings. If findings, or programs based on findings, are to be locally used it is important that these grass roots elements find them credible (Chavis et al, 1983).

As important as proximity groups can be, they are likely to be bypassed by applied researchers. Most researchers are sponsored by or work out of large-scale institutions. Moreover, researchers tend to reproduce the same kind of bureaucratic relations with their research designs that characterize their own work environment (Argyris, 1970). Respondents are cast in narrowly defined roles, as cogs in the larger wheel of research, whose only function is to input infor-

mation. The broader attachments and informational and emotional needs of respondents are not relevant in this research context.

Added to this is the fact that proximity groups are not always "convened," or formally organized. They often convene only in response to outside threats, and then only periodically (Suttles, 1972). Because of this, they are easy to overlook. Where they are convened, they are frequently viewed by officials (within corporations, unions, governments, etc.) as irrational, unreasonable and unrepresentative challenges to institutional authority. Official pressures, then, are often toward excluding them from the research process.

The consequences of excluding proximity groups from research processes, however, can be marked. When there is a we-they relationship between researchers and respondents, respondent cooperation is likely to be low and the quality of information they provide is likely to be suspect. At the same time, respondents are unlikely to accept the findings as valid, and are more likely to challenge the legitimacy of decisions and programs based on the findings (Leitko and Peterson, 1982).

These processes are apparent in a number of cases of impact-assessment research done on landfills and toxic waste dumps in western New York that I have examined. To begin with, the effect of group norms on information giving in these situations is pronounced. Neighborhoods feel under siege by the toxic wastes, the stigma the dumps imprint on themselves and their property, the press, local politicians and researchers. Even if neighbors disagree about the nature of the threat, they are assigned a common fate by their proximity to the dump site. They often convene, then, as homeowner's associations, to define their interests and to attempt to resolve these problems. Frequently their interests are at odds with those of the government agencies, which are most often aimed at containing controversy to protect the image of the community, local business, local tax bases and local budgets. The resulting conflict creates considerable apprehension among neighborhood residents when dealing with government agencies and researchers sponsored by government agencies.

In somewhat less stressful circumstances, Vidich and Bensman (1958) noticed a clear pattern of information control in "Springdale," a pseudonym for a western New York village. Confronted by discrepancies between changing political and economic realities and their image of the community, residents developed norms prohibiting public discussion of revealing issues. They, in effect, used group pressures to deny changes affecting the community. Vidich and Bensman never really discuss how this affected their ability, as outsiders, to collect information, but it is apparent that their relationship with community members was not comfortable. The village residents did not accept the study's findings as a valid assessment of their situation, and, in fact, burned Vidich and Bensman in effigy in response to the book's publication.

My own observations in West Valley, New York, disclosed a similar pattern of information control. West Valley is the site of a nuclear fuels waste repository that has been the subject of local, state and national controversy for several years. West Valley residents seem to have adopted a pattern of problem "denial" similar to that found in Springdale. A survey of area residents, for example, found those living closest to the dump site to be the least likely to perceive it as a health hazard (Community Action, 1981). Village residents were unreceptive to questions from outsiders, and were especially hostile to newspaper and television reporters. There was little public discussion of the problem, and despite the fact that the issue had received statewide and national attention, it never became a local campaign issue and was never taken up as a concern by the town council.

Even so, there were signs in interviews we conducted that the dump site was a private worry among village residents. Respondents confessed concern about the negative effects of the repository on property values, community growth, health, mental health and agricultural activities.

The U.S. Department of Energy had conducted an environmental impact study to determine the possible local impact of the dump site (U.S. Department of Energy, 1981). An expensive and broad-scoped study, it made little effort to involve community members in the research process. Also, the social impact section was confined to a few comments concerning the demographic and economic impacts of the repository. Perhaps because of this, it seemed to have little effect on the public or private understanding of the problem by village residents. Throughout our interviews, for example, no one cited the study as a source of reassurance or as evidence of danger. Whether or not the study was useful for decision making by federal and state agencies, it seemed to play little role in local consensus formation regarding the issue.

Love Canal provides us with another case of a toxic waste dump on which environmental impact research was performed. The environmental impact study was this time administered by the State, and was closed to grass roots involvement. It was so closed, in fact, that many of the study's findings were not made available until after the issue had been decided. This closure was rational from the state's point of view because the study was performed in the midst of political controversy and legal action. Researchers perhaps did not want to throw incomplete findings into this morass.

In response to official intransigence, Love Canal residents pieced together their own evidence of health effects of toxic waste leakage. Their research ranged from door-to-door informal surveys by Louis Gibbs (1982) to epidemiological studies done by "unofficial" experts mobilized to support the residents' side (Gibbs, 1982; Levine, 1982).

For Love Canal residents, rather than collective denial of the problem, there was collective support for belief in the problem. Evidence collected by Love

Canal residents and their experts tended to confirm their fears and to discredit information to the contrary produced by official sources (Gibbs, 1982; Levine, 1982). As with West Valley, then, official findings, such as those produced by the environmental impact assessment, played little positive role in the formulation of public opinion.

### **Dealing with Respondents through Intergroup Relations**

What is evident from this discussion is that intergroup relations are important to the formation of beliefs and norms within respondent groups. In the "typical" research project, sponsor and research groups work well enough together, primarily because sponsors have enough power to force their considerations into research decision making. Respondent groups, however, are frequently unorganized and uninvolved. Researchers often believe that respondent involvement would spoil the findings and sponsors are reluctant to give that much voice to respondents, who usually occupy subordinate positions. Respondents may react, in turn, by forming norms restricting cooperation with the research and by establishing beliefs which are contradictory to the findings.

As an alternative, respondents may be brought into research decision making through a variety of direct involvement or representative techniques (Argyris, 1970; Leitko and Peterson, 1982). As "insiders," respondent groups have the same opportunity as sponsors to frame the research problem and to become involved in the implementation of the research design. Evidence suggests that respondent participation functions to raise the status of the respondent group, to decrease their motivation to withhold "valid" information, and to increase the likelihood that they will support the findings (Leitko and Peterson, 1982).

I am currently involved in an environmental and social impact assessment study of a landfill in "Shamrock," New York, in which such a "participatory" research model is being put to use. Shamrock is a fictitious name for a rural community at the edge of the Buffalo metropolitan area. The landfill in question is important to the region because it processes most of the waste from Erie County (which includes Buffalo), waste from part of western Pennsylvania, and most recently waste from Monroe County (which includes Rochester). The landfill owner feels that the landfill is safe and that, in fact, it is run as a model landfill. He wishes to keep the landfill operating, and there is a suggestion that he wishes to expand it.

Local residents, especially those owning homes abutting or near the landfill, oppose the landfill's expansion, if not its existence. Although the landfill is not licensed to process toxic wastes, homeowners are concerned that toxics may have been placed there by a previous owner operating when regulations were not well enforced. Also, nontoxic dumps are still able to process substances that many consider to be toxic under current regulatory requirements. In addition to

health effects of toxic wastes, the homeowners are worried about noise pollution, aesthetics, land values and traffic safety. Their worry has been amplified by the nearby Love Canal episode, which sensitized homeowners to both the health effects of toxic landfills and to the possibility of effecting decisions regarding landfills through grass roots organization. There is strong identification of Shamrock homeowners with Love Canal homeowners, and even some competition. Shamrock homeowners claim that their "disaster" is really worse than Love Canal because leakage from the landfill could potentially affect the aquifer serving a large part of the region. In an attempt to contain the landfill, the Shamrock residents hired the lawyer who represented the Love Canal Homeowners Association to bring suit against the landfill owner.

In response to community concern and opposition, the landfill owner contracted with a group from the environmental studies program at Alfred University to perform an environmental and social impact assessment of the landfill. We entered a situation, then, in which conflict between a number of groups—homeowners, local officials, the landfill owner, county, and state officials—was cast. Two more limited studies, searching for and finding no leakage from the landfill, had already been completed by a state agency and the county health department. Although these studies were accepted by the state, county and local officials, neither had any credibility with the antilandfill constituency in the community. The antilandfill constituency did not trust the findings for a number of reasons: First, they believed that the government agencies were all in league to suppress negative evidence regarding the landfill so that the county would not have to pursue more expensive disposal strategies. This basic distrust was heightened because of a lack of responsiveness by the investigating agencies to requests for information from the homeowners.

In order to deal with this volatile situation, we decided that the first step in our impact assessment was to "open" our research to community participation. To exclude homeowners from involvement in the project would have been to meet the same fate as the state and county studies. We held a preliminary meeting with interested townspeople which was attended by approximately 30 residents. The purpose of the meeting was to "come clean" regarding our plans and to solicit information regarding the landfill and its impact. During the meeting we also set up a more permanent convening system for local community involvement by: (a) establishing a newsletter mailing list for distribution of information concerning the study; (b) inviting residents to set up a liaison group to attend planned meetings; and (c) inviting residents to present evidence of their own, have their wells tested, point out areas that needed looking into, and so forth.

The meeting began with a considerable amount of tension. Residents were concerned about the extent to which information from the landfill would be available to us, our own veracity (given that the project was funded by the landfill owner), and the procedures we would use. A town lawyer attended the

meeting and gave it an adversarial cast by focusing discussion on technical and legal questions. We fielded the questions, offered community involvement, and explained the exact methods that would be used to assess the various impacts. By the end of the meeting, most of the residents had turned from suspicious to cooperative and were volunteering their wells, wildlife records, and so forth for our examination. The meeting seemed to be a successful beginning, then, to turning group norms to our advantage for information gathering and for establishing the trust that would allow our findings to be deemed credible.

Moreover, the open meeting solved the problem of our dependence on the landfill owner for funding. We were concerned going into the project that, like the state and the county researchers, we would be seen by the residents as a "shill" for the landfill owner, who was providing the funding for the study. We had no intention of behaving in this manner, and set up the funding mechanism with the university so that the owner had no control over the expenditures once he had contributed the money. We were still subject to criticism, however, because the landfill owner was to contribute the money as it was needed, and if he were dissatisfied with the study, he could refuse any more payments.

The open meeting brought people from all different constituencies related to the issue. The town supervisor, who supported the landfill, ran the meeting. Also present were members of the antilandfill constituency, the lawyer, newspaper reporters, and interested but noncommitted local residents. As the meeting moved from formalities to substantive issues, the question about our objectivity and willingness to release negative findings surfaced. We responded that we would indeed release all of the findings, but that there was little we could do to continue the study if the funding were discontinued. At this point, homeowners suggested that the town support the study should the landfill owner discontinue funding. The town supervisor was put into a position of appearing to endorse the withholding of negative findings if he did not financially support the research. In order to prove that he was fair and not "owned" by the landfill, he made the commitment to come up with the money should our funding be cut off.

The point is that in the context of an open meeting, where all parties could air their grievances, the "independence" issue surfaced and an acceptable solution was negotiated. The homeowners were able to "import" their political power from the community context to give themselves voice in the research project. If the research project had been closed, the issue would have remained in the background and the residents would have had to use resistance and *inuendo* to protect their interests. Through the open meeting, we gained financial independence. More importantly, rather than the community being coopted by the project, the project was coopted by the community.

As a consequence of our exposure during the first meeting, we were invited to a separate meeting of the Shamrock Citizens Environmental Committee, the dominant antilandfill group in the area. About 12 people attended the meeting,



and a town council member in attendance estimated that this group represented the position of approximately 40% of the town's voters. Again, the meeting started with expressions of doubt about our veracity given the ties to the landfill owner. One member indicated that he was not going to cooperate with the study for this expressed reason. The discussion turned to their beliefs about the harmfulness of the landfill and to their equally strong beliefs in the existence of a cabal among officials (county politicians, local politicians, independent local engineering firms, the landfill owners, the state agency) into which we were being pulled.

After four hours of intense discussion, we apparently assured the committee members that we were independent and that we were willing to take their concerns into account. Indicative of this change were offers of cooperation from all members present, offers to consult on technical aspects of local geology, hydrology, well construction, and politics and expressions of confidence in our independence.

### **Implementing the Open Research Program**

As one might guess, an open research project in a highly politicized situation is likely to become politicized itself. This certainly happened to us. Including respondents in the research meetings made us subject to pressures from other groups with a stake in the project. This included town officials, officials from a state agency, and the landfill owner, as well as respondents. But although the political climate complicated the day-to-day administration of the project, it improved the effectiveness of the project as a clinical intervention. Generally, because other groups were cooperating, no single group could afford to withhold its cooperation. At the same time, group pressures created checks and balances on one another, allowing us to act independently.

The homeowners, for example, took us up on our invitation to attend meetings of the research group and to receive the newsletter. With their participation came some pressure to turn up negative findings. They gained confidence, for example, when an analysis of runoff patterns from the landfill turned up findings different from those reported by the owner, and we released these findings to them and to the newspaper.

When the town supervisor found out that the homeowners were attending our meetings, he too decided to attend. Although he did not pressure us "overtly" in the meetings to any great extent, he did try to influence our opinions. After the meetings were over and people were milling around the room, it was not unusual for the supervisor to take one or another of the research staff aside and try to point out quirks in the personalities or arguments of the homeowners.

Perhaps because the respondents were participating directly in the meetings, the landfill owner did not directly participate and for the most part did not try

to influence the research proceedings. It was perhaps important for him to demonstrate his "distance" from the project. He did express his displeasure when the findings were released which showed his depiction of the runoff pattern to be incorrect. Shortly after the findings appeared in the local paper he regraded part of the property to alter the runoff pattern.

Perhaps the most difficult group to deal with was the state agency that had done the previous study. We had made repeated attempts to contact the agency regarding their study of the area and geological information relevant to our project. Despite frequent phone calls, the agency did not respond. Following our open meeting, a newspaper reporter attributed a reference to our study director in a story alleging that the agency was being uncooperative with the study. Although the allegation was generally true, the director had not given the quote. The clipping service for the agency in Albany, NY, picked up the story and the Albany office called the Buffalo office to find out why they were not cooperating. This must have irritated officials within the Buffalo office, because they then wrote a letter to the president of Alfred University asking him to control the statements we made to the press. At the same time (and we have no direct evidence that this was intentionally tied to the issue) the state agency reversed a decision that would have allowed the landfill to operate slightly at variance to prescriptions so that it could install the "flumes" we needed to collect drainage water for a "mass balance" study.

After a number of phone calls, explanations and counterexplanations, the agency finally assigned someone to work with us and provided the necessary information. The flumes were eventually allowed, although this part of the study was delayed considerably. Although the exact reasons for the agency's turnaround in cooperation are difficult to document, the publicity in the newspaper and the agency's fear of a negative public reaction seemed to play a primary role. Also, support from the town supervisor and the landfill owner for the study may have been important factors.

Opening the research to respondent representatives set off an intergroup chain reaction that resulted in both increased group cooperation and increased research autonomy. Because the homeowners participated, so did the town supervisor. Because the town supervisor and the landfill owner had a stake in the project, and because of the political sensitivity of the state agency, the state agency eventually cooperated. Because the proceedings were so public, the landfill owner, who was funding the study, distanced himself from the study.

## **Outcomes**

At this point the research project has been going on for about one year. Approximately three quarters of the work is complete. Signs are that the landfill is "tight." There is no evidence that harmful chemicals are being released.

Wildlife around the landfill is healthy and abundant. The landfill seems to be well run and, in fact, to be advanced in landfill methods.

Although it is difficult to completely assess the outcomes of our open research method, signs are positive. First, all of the groups maintained involvement and support over the tenure of the project, and it is hoped that they will all accept the findings. This will be most difficult for the homeowners, who want negative findings they apparently are not going to get. There are some indications, however, that even they are beginning to resign themselves to the fact that the landfill does not leak. As the research has developed, they have shifted their attacks away from the leakage of toxic wastes to lower priority concerns, such as noise pollution and "gasses" escaping the landfill.

Perhaps more importantly, over the year in which we have conducted this project, relations between the homeowners and the landfill owner seem to have changed somewhat. When we began the research, the homeowners were seeking a "legal" solution to their grievances. More recently, the homeowners, as a collective, have discussed dropping their legal suit and their pursuing direct negotiations with the landfill owner toward a compromise solution. Even if this apparent turn from conflict to compromise is fragile, or is not directly attributable to our intervention, it shows that we at least did not further polarize the community or prevent change from happening. This is a claim that the previous impact assessments cannot make.

It might be suggested that we have simply worn the homeowners down, or coopted them by allowing them to participate in a process in which they had little or no influence. I believe that this is clearly not the case. To begin with, the homeowners did have influence. They had the political influence to force the town supervisor to financially back the project and they had the ability all through the project to withdraw their support and to refuse to let us collect samples on their property. More likely, because they did express their concerns and doubts, we were able to directly address and answer them. The uncertainties they had about our intentions and methods were closed off.

This is not to say that the homeowners are now in consensus with the landfill owner or the town and county officials regarding the landfill. They are not, and probably never will be. It is perhaps an error to think that clinical efforts like this can, or always should, produce a consensus among the groups involved. The situation remains political.

If this case can be generalized, open research is not going to depoliticize situations where interest groups have substantially different stakes and perspectives regarding an issue. It can, however, help relationships among groups to develop from conflict to bargaining processes. Where intergroup conflict is at hand, and information on the bargaining strength of each party is limited, groups are likely to raise their aspirations and initial offers in order to end up at an

eventually more favorable solution. Since both sides are likely to do this, they often end up at a bargaining stalemate (Bachrach and Lawler, 1981).

What open research can do is to more clearly and publicly define the bargaining positions of each group. Each group can know more definitely the facts of the situation, and know that the other group knows the same facts. With the strengths and weaknesses of each of their positions revealed, parties are more likely to set their bargaining aspirations at realistic levels and enter into more productive negotiations (Bachrach and Lawler, 1981).

For Shamrock, this means that our research findings have probably weakened the position of the homeowners by invalidating their claims about toxic waste leakage. On the negative side, they may have to accept a compromise solution which they feel is undesirable. On the positive side, the movement toward bargaining on the issue may allow its political resolution, and some closure to be obtained for all groups involved. This is obviously positive for the landfill owner, who wants to continue developing his business, and for rest of the region, which benefits from the landfill's operation. There are also plusses for the homeowners, however. They have been living with a high degree of anxiety over the safety of the landfill, which the findings should at least partly help to resolve. It is also ironic that their movement to close the landfill by labeling it dangerous may have stigmatized the community, hurting their own land values, and helping economically to trap them on their property. If the controversy about the landfill were to die down, there is a possibility that the stigma on their property could decrease also.

## Conclusions

Group and intergroup processes play an important clinical role in applied research. In particular, the structure of relations among respondents, researchers, sponsors and other interested groups is likely to condition norms and beliefs within respondent groups. Most typically, respondent groups are excluded from information and influence regarding research decision making, and react by forming beliefs which challenge the credibility of the findings and norms which complicate the collection of valid information.

Open research is an alternative in which representatives of respondent groups are allowed to participate in research decision making. From our case, respondent participation worked well, providing the expected outcomes of respondent cooperation and belief in findings. Our open research design also produced unexpected positive outcomes by altering the nature of intergroup relations within the research project, and perhaps within the community. Respondent participation increased the pressure on other stakeholding groups to participate in order to protect their own interests. At the same time, the political atmosphere that this

created resulted in a set of checks and balances that decreased the ability of any one group to overly influence or to subvert the research project. Also, the open format allowed important questions to surface and to be negotiated in public rather than to be resolved in a more subterranean fashion. Finally, because the open research produced findings which were public and perceived as valid by all groups, it may have contributed to the development of a bargaining relationship between homeowners and the landfill owner by more clearly defining mutual bargaining positions.

I am not sure that in reading this case many will think that the "right side" has won, calling into question the ethics and appropriateness of open research as a clinical intervention. After all, city hall and a landfill owner are likely to win over a grass roots environmental movement. Our open research may have contributed to this.

I have tried to make clear, however, that a process other than "cooptation" is determining this outcome. Cooptation occurs when powerless people are brought into and made to feel part of a process over which they have no real control. This is not the case here. Politics is determining the outcome of this issue. The role of open research, as a clinical intervention, has been clearly and publicly to define the issue involved so that groups can make enlightened choices regarding their self-interest. Some groups may gain and others lose from this process. For the community, as a set of interdependent groups, however, there is a gain. The community gains because the "reasonableness" of the political decision is increased and because its ability to be self-governing is enhanced. I believe that this sort of reasoned self-regulation is, or should be, the goal of clinical sociology.

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